Drawing Humanitarian Communication as Performativity: Visual Design of the Tigray Refugee Situation on the UN Refugee Agency UK Website

Antonio Piga
University of Cagliari (Italy)

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the discursive construction of the refugee situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region by examining photographs found on the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHRC) United Kingdom website. The purpose is to discern humanitarian aid communication discourse not simply for its informational value, but also in its performative force of narrative to frame the refugee crisis as one that merits support (Chouliaraky 2017). Multimodal CDA and social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Kress and van Leeuwen 2017) were employed in order to break down visual communication into elements, and to systematically reveal the performative practice of meaning in relation to the categories of *settings, the represented participants, actions, angles, and proximemics.* Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted in order to determine the number of photos with a given feature. By highlighting the plight of those forcibly displaced and emphasising their uniqueness and personal experiences - in contrast to the dehumanised massified representation found in western media (Chouliaraky 2017; Adi and Cheregi 2015) -, the phenomenon of their forced fleeing from Tigray is humanised. In line with Bellander (2021), the UNHRC is constructed as being trustworthy and actionable, and refugees are clearly depicted as being in urgent need of support. Visitors to the UK website are invited to feel they are involved with the life of the refugees and morally engaged in "the work performed by the organization" (Bellander 2021: 310). By means of the combination of specific affection drawing on discourses of morality, solidarity and ethical equality, the overall images provide "the symbolic conditions under which we are invited to imagine the predicament of these sufferers" (Chouliaraky 2017: 5) and in so doing to appeal to a force that will work towards a practical push towards action.

Keywords: humanitarian communication, performativity, visual design, refugee crisis, Tigray.

"We did not know what was going on when we heard the gun shots. Many people were killed – we could see 10, twenty bodies lying on the ground. That's when we decided to leave. I walked until my legs were injured and bleeding. I thank God that we are safe here and we have something to eat."

– Gannite, Ethiopian refugee woman who fled into Sudan from clashes in the Tigray region

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2015, following two deadly shipwrecks off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, the term *refugee crisis* appeared for the first time in the UK, as well in other western

countries. It was a 'new' phenomenon quite distinct from the notion of a *humanitarian crisis* (Grafstöm and Windell 2019 in Bellander 2021). Facing the arrival of the largest influx of immigrants (a million) since the second World War, from Middle Eastern and African countries, the European Union endeavoured to create a unified refugee support base that would keep the continent secure while at the same time also protecting the lives of those fleeing persecution and war. As a result of various global disparities, record numbers of forcefully displaced persons were crossing EU borders in search of protection. In 2016, the UK government along with other EU countries imposed tight restrictions in order to reduce immigration quotas; the UK had just voted in a referendum in favour of Brexit. In spite of this, shutting borders did not result in a reduction in the worldwide refugee population. On the contrary, according to UNHRC figures retrieved from 2022, the numbers have continued to increase rapidly. Humanitarian intergovernmental groups, as well as single government and UNHRC have been compelled to dramatically improve their activities at entrance points due to the humanitarian consequences of EU and the UK migration policies. The UNHRC is continually bringing the world's refugee situation to public attention as a key humanitarian concern worthy of serious consideration. Indeed, the refugee situation has had a great impact on the political debates in the UK – also in the wake of Brexit - as well as in all of the EU countries. To a large extent this is related to the fact that right-wing populist parties are gaining more and more influence in many European countries and the UK is no exception. In 2016 the Conservative Party was re-elected in Great Britain, with restrictions of immigration quotas and Brexit as its main manifesto promises. The ever-growing political actions to cut immigration quotas, as well as the general public's lack of trust in Intergovernmental Organizations, create uncertainties about who is in need of assistance and who is in a position to support and provide concrete help to people in need.

Despite the fact that humanitarian aid communication has been widely researched in the past (cfr. Chouliaraki 2010; Dorga 2007; Fr yd 2017), no studies have yet looked at how today's refugee scenario is portrayed from the viewpoint of an Intergovernmental Organization such as the UNHRC. Indeed, these kinds of studies relating to discursive constructions of refugees and their predicament are frequently employed in reporting by print media and in news in general. The framings of news material, i.e. how journalists highlight (or omit) particular facts in ways that alter readers' interpretations of issues, their causes, and how they should be ethically appraised, are typically the focus of this type of research (Adi and Cheregy 2015). In addition, studies of current reporting on the world's refugee situation in print media frequently focus on negative representations of migrants based on discursive patterns such as Islamophobia (e.g. Boeva 2016; Ghazalaswad 2019), or on shaping national identities and propagating national stereotypes (Adi and Cheregy 2015). The influence of right-wing populist parties in such representations is clearly evident (Kryzanowski 2018).

The many viewpoints concerning the problems of refugees propagated by the media, right-wing populist actors, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) consequently form a variety of discourses (cfr. Fairclough 1995). Discourses and knowledge as social activity have the potential to influence politics and power relations, and hence the refugee situation as a whole.

Bearing this in mind, the main intent of this article is to examine the discursive construction of the refugee situation in images found on the United Nations Refugee Agency's United Kingdom website (https://www.unhcr.org/uk/) in an effort to identify the 'language of image' that

humanitarian aid communication uses to frame the refugee situation as one that warrants support and assistance. According to Bellander (2021), and Breazu and Machin (2018), photographs are nowadays more important than ever as a component of visual design, not only because they can claim objectivity and capture real-world events, but also because they can produce imagery that represents more nuanced concepts and viewpoints.

The rationale underlying this article centres on the idea of interpreting and understanding humanitarian communication in terms of performativity. Specifically, we are interested in the ways in which this type of communication employs imagery to create an emotional bond between the observer and the refugees and how it can shed light on the ethical recommendations for action that this form of communication makes possible in our society (Chouliaraky 2010). This analytical approach assumes that by embodying paradigmatic forms of feeling and responding to suffering, such communication not only addresses the public as a pre-existing collectivity that awaits stimulus to take action, but also has the perlocutionary force and capacity to create this collectivity as a body of action in the process of visualising and narrating its cause (Boltanski 1999: 35). In other words, the performative perspective calls attention to the fact that humanitarian communication serves as "moral education" making a number of subtle suggestions about how 'we the viewers' should feel and respond to suffering (Chouliaraky 2010: 5; cfr. also Boltanky 1999).

DATA DESCRIPTION AND SELECTION

The corpus for this study comprises a total of fifty-two photographs published in the "Emergency" subsection of UNHCR UK's website (https://www.unhcr.org/uk/ethiopia-tigray-emergency.html) between November 2020 – the date marking the beginning of the conflict in Tigray- and April 2022, i.e. within the time span that marked the most dramatic period of the 'refugee crises' in Tigray. This analysis aims to reveal the choices made in the narrative representations and how these choices shape the way the actual events are represented to the viewer, in terms of the types of ideas, values, and processes which are being foregrounded or backgrounded in the images on the UNHCR UK website. The purpose of such an analysis is to explore how the refugee situation in Tigray is narrated and designed performatively in the images.

The *corpus* was selected based on the criteria that (a) all the photographs were published in the "Emergencies" subsection, as opposed to other subsections such as "What we do", "News and Stories" etc., and (b), as stated above, they concern exclusively the Tigray "refugee crisis". This second choice was made because, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports (2021), the situation in Tigray is the refugee state of paramount concern in the world. Indeed, the UNHRC estimates 5.5 million people face acute food insecurity, including 400,000 people in northern Ethiopia facing famine-like conditions – "more than in all of the humanitarian crises in the rest of the world combined"[1]. The decision to analyse the UK website of the UNHRC was motivated by the fact that, according to the diplomatic editor Patrik Wintour (2021) and (in proportion to the inhabitants), the largest donor of foreign aid to Ethiopia is the UK, which has provided more than £75m to alleviate the risk of famine. The implication behind these results spawned strong interest in the analysis of the United Nations British site, suggesting that at least in part, these results may be the outcome of drawing on a view of

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/ethiopia-tigray-emergency.html. [last accessed April 2022].

humanitarian communication as performative narrative, in the sense that 'what is being done with visuals' in the narration of refugees and their needs has led to such a considerable perlocutionary effect that it had a considerable impact on British donors.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, multimodal CDA was employed (van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen1999) along with Bellander's (2010) semiotic approach to the codification of photographs, in order to analyse an *ad hoc* corpus of images presented in UNHRC of UK website. The tools from Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Ledin and Machin 2018) are used for breaking down visual communication into elements, in order to systematically reveal and describe different levels of meaning in relation to the categories of *settings, represented participants, actions, angles, and proxemics.* The analysis was carried out both qualitatively and quantitatively in order to calculate the number of photos displaying certain key features of interest.

S*etting* can be defined as the location in which the depicted scene takes place. In general terms, reduced settings or decontextualized images are used to represent ideas or concepts (Ledin and Machin 2018) which can be considered as 'symbolic' representations of reality. Effectively, they convey 'essentiality,' 'universality,' and 'timelessness' to their representations, thus communicating 'the spirit of something,' 'the essence of what it looks like,' as universal messages (Piga 2018). On the other hand, salient settings communicate authenticity and remind the viewer that the depicted scenes are true to life (Chouliaraki 2010; Bellander 2021), in which factuality, proximity, documentary information and contingency are all enhanced (Piga 2018).

In this specific case, the represented participants are Tigrayan refugees and United Nations Refugee Agency staff. The different ways of representing people in images can be described as follows: when a single participant is represented up-close or his or her figure is drawn attention to through foregrounding, this encourages the viewer to be drawn in and to think about the participant's experience and uniqueness (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; van Leeuwen 2005). On the other hand, when participants are represented in a longer and wider perspective, empathy and involvement is less connoted and perceptible as visual individuation is reduced. Individualisation is found in close-up perspectives, which covey a strong connotation of humanisation of the individuals represented. On the other hand, photographs of groups, collections of people or crowds exhibit massification and collectivity, which has the effect of connoting depersonalisation (Bellander 2021; Chouliaraky 2017).

Actions are simply defined as the process of doing something, that is when the represented participants are actively involved in some sort of action. Bellander (2021) notes that in images they are read through the means of so-called indexical signs; namely, as a correlation or an inferencing of visualising something that unfolds over time (Ledin and Machin 2018) and that in a given perspective leads towards the factuality of the realization of the proposed goals.

Another parameter taken into account is *angle*. Angles are especially important in determining the viewer's position in relation to what is being represented. For instance, vertical angles express the concepts of superiority vs. inferiority and strength vs. vulnerability. In other words, a represented participant comes across as being vulnerable when viewed from above. Looking

up at a represented participant from a lower perspective transmits the idea of a participant's strength. Someone sitting on the floor appears friendlier than someone standing. Being positioned in front angles engages viewers with the represented participants much more than being collocated from oblique angles from the side, in which the viewer becomes a mere bystander. A shot of a line from behind someone's shoulders gives the impression that the viewer is also waiting in line (Bellander 2021; cfr. also Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Kress and van Leeuwen 2017).

With regard to *proxemics,* two aspects of special relevance are the parameters of distance and gaze. More specifically, close-up perspectives provide viewers with greater familiarity with the represented participants since they depict a participant in greater detail than those viewed in a long shot perspective (Bellander 2021; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999). As for the type of gaze, it is important to understand whether or not the represented participants are looking at the viewer or not. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1999; 2017), the distinction between eye contact and lack of eye contact can be thought of in terms of "offer" and "demand". If the represented participants are turning their gaze toward the person viewing the image, it implies they are 'demanding' something to the viewer; conversely, turning their back on the person looking means they are 'offering' something to the viewer.

The Performative force of visual narratives

As already stated above in 2., photographic images from the UNHRC website were selected as data to scrutinize in the study. These images serve as examples of social practises or instances in which an understanding of the Tigray refugee crisis is constructed in the UNHRC's UK Website. According to Bellander (2021: 313), an interconnected relationship is established "between the presuppositions of understanding of the world's refugee situation made available to [...] website visitors and their perceptions of the situation, their role in the situation, and their *opportunities to influence the situation*" [italics added]. Otherwise stated, website visitors are invited to respond to the refugee situation in virtue of the ways in which they perceive the situation and, most importantly, "their perception is dependent on which understandings are made available to them" (Bellander 2021: 213). By the same token, it can be said that a visual website narrative is a performative 'call to action' practice, in the sense that the visual narratives and stories of suffering on the website not only offer the symbolic circumstances in which viewers are invited to imagine the plight of these sufferers, but also think, feel, and above all act in their favour (Chouliaraky 2017; Chouliaraky and Stolic 2017; Chouliaraky 2010). In this sense, the UNHRC website – or at least the one under scrutiny, devoted specifically to UK visitors -, 'is about doing things with visuals, not simply about using a visual medium to report facts'. Clearly, images do more than just provide information and narrative about refugees. Specifically, what the UNHRC attempts to do through visual framing is to narrate refugees "as particular kinds of subjects and inscribes our relationship to them in specific affective and moral registers" (Chouliaraky and Zaborowsky 2017: 6). It is therefore this symbolic world, or what Butler refers to as the "field of the perceptible", that governs and regulates "whether and how *we respond to other people's suffering*" (2009: 64) [italics added]. According to Chouliaraky and Zaborowsky (2017: 6), it is not only a matter of who suffers and who looks at the suffering, but most importantly: "how the sufferer is narrated shapes how we make sense of the world beyond 'our' continent and how 'we' engage with those who come from non-Western zones of death and destitution". People's conceptualization of a visual narrative, or a news narrative in general, relies on this performative perception of news narratives, "whereby news narratives

open up diverse 'fields of the perceptible' and, in so doing, position 'us' and refugees within normative relationships of *emotion and action;* telling 'us' how we should feel *and relate to them*" (ibidem) [italics added].

Central to the performative effect of the end product is the visual credibility of the story-telling of suffering. Trustworthiness and reliability are therefore essential to the practise of politics of recognition because of this ability to speak in settings that support the significance of one's story-telling (Chouliaraky 2017; 2010). It is this aspect of a "voice as value" (Couldry 2010: 21) that renders the UNHRC website instrumental and functional to this "politics of recognition" (Chouliaraky and Zaborowsky 2017: 6). It is the manner in which refugees are portrayed in the UK's UNHRC website and how they acquire their value that gives performative force to the visual narrative.

Therefore, although photographs are "indexical representations of reality in which the sign is caused by its referent" (Piga 2018: 249) and consequently carry the affordance of witnessing a sense of neutrality, they characterize reality and facilitate an eyewitness perspective of events, and so make it easier for a viewer to interpret them as crystallizing 'the truth' (Bellander 2021). A photograph's frame is never big enough to capture the complexity of reality, and thus the photographer is persistently making choices about settings, participants, angles, and proxemics, among other things. These decisions and choices convey worldviews and serve as a conduit for ideas and values. Visual designers can thus decide meaning by making choices through the use of proxemics, angles, participants as well as other photo editing techniques (Bellander 2021). In this study, visual communication is deconstructed into its component parts (settings, participants, angles, proxemics) using tools from social semiotics and Multimodal CDA (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999), in order to systematically reveal and describe various levels of meaning - including concealed power relations between donors and receivers. In short, it enables us to discover the true performative force of narrative.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS
Visual design of Tigray refugees in the UNHCR's UK website and their needs
The visual design of refugees of Tigray was primarily examined by analysing *proxemics* in the photographs in which refugees appear, whilst the implied needs of the refugees were studied specifically by examining *settings* and *actions.*

Firstly, it is important to point out that the majority of the photographs depict refugees rather than UNHRC staff, who appear in only 11 photographs out of a total of 52. Around 55% of the photographs feature Tigrayan refugees in a close-up proxemic perspective, as in Figure 1[2]. According to Bellander (2021), Drüeke *et al.* (2021), this contributes to the perception of the global refugee crisis, and in this specific case of the Tigray refugee crisis. Refugees are perceived as individuals, each with their own uniqueness, personal stories and experiences, which conveys the potential of offering a more humanised representation of their plight (Burman 1994). Close-up proxemics contrasts with the dehumanised representation of long-shot perspectives, as frequently represented in western media (Chouliaraky and Zaborowsky 2017), in which the subtle connotation of racialization is also reflected in the massification of dark-

---

[2]   https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2022/4/625580884/mixed-emotions-family-partially-reunited-fleeing-tigray-conflict.html.

skinned men suggesting an "animalistic reference to 'swarms,' 'flocks,' or cockroaches" (Chouliaraky and Stolic: 2017: 8) who intimidate 'others' and threaten our security (Boltansky 1999).

Regarding the number of photographs in which refugees appear, one aspect noted by Bellander (2021) that is worth mentioning is the fact that women and children are depicted more frequently than men. Indeed, women are the subject of the majority of the photographs; the rest show small (7 photographs) or larger groups of women with children, or photographs depicting children alone. Only a relatively small percentage show men (less than 25%). As already stated above, this is consistent with the reporting on the activities of MSF (Bellander 2021), and the news reporting by Dogra (2011), but seems to contrast with western news media in general, in which men are more frequently shown than women and children (Adi and Cheregi 2015; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Chouliaraky and Zaborowsky 2017). The representation of the more vulnerable category of women and children in close-up proxemics, and in general the representation of refugees as humans, i.e. as unique individuals, draws on the 'aesthetic property' (Chouliaraky 2012) of how humanitarian communication is conceived, namely in terms of the ways in which images are devised and employed performatively in humanitarian discourse in order to establish emotional connectivity between the viewer and the represented sufferer. This aspect affords an insight into the moral calls to action, thereby endorsing "paradigmatic forms of feeling towards people suffering" (Boltanski 1999: 35) with possible implications for the perlocutionary force of these images on potential donors.

As for *settings,* most of the photos are taken in Sudan[3], where the majority of the Tigray refugees have fled to. Taking the context into account, it can be said that all the photographs provide highly contextualized images in which the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea can be fully understood. The refugees depicted are presented as being truly authentic and engaged in actions which are vividly documented in contexts where the settings and subjects are identifiable. In contrast to observations made by scholars (Bellander 2021; Adi and Cheregi 2015) who have widely documented that most of the images depict outdoor settings, it could be said that in the images under scrutiny only the photographs taken at the very beginning of the refugee crisis (November 2020) focused mainly on the outdoor camp settings in the data. Such settings were usually improvised makeshift shelters or water stations, including images of tarpaulin sheds placed in fields under the sun in scorching temperatures and in the midst of dust-filled terrain (see Figure 2)[4]. On the other hand, those taken in 2022 tended to be more indoor camp environment settings, namely hospitals, prefabricated for hot foods and even prefabricated schoolhouses for orphans and children in general (Figure 3)[5], However, they all appear to be temporary forms of housing, suggesting the need for more permanent ones. The narrative in the UNHRC UK website seems therefore to focus on a shift in its trajectory course from the early "shocking effect" images (Lissner 1979; Benthall 1993) to

---

[3] According to UNHRC, refugees live in Sudan over 130 locations across the country's 18 States. About 70 per cent live outside of camps in villages, towns and settlements. The majority of refugees and asylum-seekers in Sudan face high levels of poverty, limited access to opportunities that provide any livelihood, and are hosted in some of the poorest regions of the country, where host communities are also struggling.

[4] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2021/1/6006a31a4/unhcr-finds-dire-need-eritrean-refugee-camps-cut-tigray-conflict.html.

[5] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2022/3/6221d7294/unhcr-seeks-us205-million-deliver-life-saving-assistance-16-million-people.html.

'positive imagery' campaigns (Lidchi 1999). According to Cottle and Nolan (2007), this shift is most likely an attempt to renew the legitimation of humanitarian communication. In fact, the raw realism of showing human bodies in an extreme state of starvation and suffering in the first phase, indicated that the UNHCR discourse was designed to appeal to refugee suffering as a universal moral cause, while the images of 'positivity' of the subsequent phases of the forced fleeing express a connotative discourse focusing on a sentimental gratitude that evokes appreciation for the kindness of the benefactor. By showing disaster relief through the development of action aid initiatives, the UNHRC seems to reinforce the legitimacy of asking for donations by giving prominence to the successful results obtained thanks to the benefactors.

Again, as already stated, humanitarian communication is seen…in terms of its aesthetic properties, that is in terms of the ways in which it uses imagery to establish emotional connectivity between spectator and sufferer, [ ] can provide insights into the *moral proposals to action* that this form of communication makes possible in our culture (Chouliaraky 2010: 5) [italics added].

This analytical approach is therefore based on a view of performativity, which does not simply address and represent the public as a pre-existing collectivity that awaits action, but it also has the perlocutionary force "to constitute this collectivity as a body of action in the process of visualising and narrating its cause" (Boltanski 1999: 35). As Chouliaraky (2008; 2010) has argued, this does not imply that viewers become slavishly uncritical of how humanitarian communication campaigns aim to influence and persuade them in a "deterministic manner" (Chouliaraky 2010: 5); however, this performative viewpoint highlights the function of humanitarian communication as a "moral education" (*ibidem*). In other words, it puts forward a series of more or less subtle subliminal suggestions of how people should feel in order that they re-act towards suffering, by shaping and moulding our longer-term attitudes to action through "habituation" over the course of time (Chouliaraki 2008: 831-47).

Visual design of self representation: the analysis of UNHRC and its operations
With regard now to *proxemics*, settings and activities were the key method of study used to analyse the UNHCR staff and the factuality of their actions and operations. The key findings were as follows: 1) all the operators are closely connected to the UNHRC organization; 2) the UNHRC staff comprises both male and female members of varying ages and origins; 3) they display symmetrical proxemics; and 4) factuality in both medical as well as in a wide variety of fields meet the diverse needs of refugees.

As stated above in 4.1, despite the fact that the website's focus is unmistakably on the refugees, 4 out of the 52 photographs show UNHCR staff members alone, while in all the other photos the UNHCR operators appear alongside refugees (in 11 photographs they appear alongside refugees, in 4 photographs they appear alone, as stated above in *4.1*). The first significant detail is that, with no exceptions, UNHCR logos are only noticeable on personnel's attire. The logo itself conveys a very strong message of reassurance to provide vitally needed emergency aid. As a result, according to Bellander (2021), a strong connection is established between the organization's operators, the job they conduct and the notion of the UN Refugees Agency enshrined in the logo.

In addition, the photographs show that the staff of UNHCR are men and women from different corners of the world. They have various skin tones and possess characteristics linked with various countries and faiths[6]. This highlights UNHCR' s global profile and the refugee crisis as a global issue that involves people from near and far who have a variety of cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. The presence of UNHCR personnel of many nationalities and genders runs counter to colonial discourse, which depicts the recipient in such a way as to reinforce the idea of "refugees's otherness" (Chouliaraky 2017: 8) and portrays them as the victim of the contemplation of the "white, western" benefactor consideration (Dogra 2011: 72; cfr. also Bellander 2021). True to this perspective and to confirm the underlying thesis, UNHCR's Senior Emergency Coordinator, Seda Kuzucu, points out that "social workers come from all over the world and they are very close to the community and we value their presence as they really support the physical and mental wellbeing of the displaced"[7]. In addition to this, it is important to say that there are also a number of African personnel present among UNHRC staff. Their presence goes some way to countering the image of "the colonial paternalism where the Adult – Northern offers help and knowledge to the infantilised- South" (Burman 1994: 241). Therefore, rather than the image of dark-skinned people alone, the humanising potential inherent in pinpointing the suffering lies in mobilising empathy simply in the name of 'our' common sense of humanity, a transnational solidarity that portrays refugees simply as 'humans in need' in general, and not in terms of the world's North-South divide.

Another point deserving consideration is the one which could be named 'symbolic proxemics'. A close analysis of the photographs depicting the UNHCR personnel shows that none of them wear formal dress or austere uniforms. On the contrary, they dress candidly in their personal clothes, such as jeans and sneakers together with a loose jacket bearing the UNHCR logo. Notwithstanding their vests displaying the logo, this may indicate that the UNHCR staff appear to want to place themselves in a position of symbolic proxemics in a symmetrical relationship with the refugees and to "appear more approachable" (Bellander 2021: 323) to them, without giving them the impression of superiority, which could prove demoralising to them. The overall message promotes a narrative that ultimately calls for solidarity, inclusion and universal commonality for refugees by the UNHCR staff, in which the relationship evoked is not between 'us' and 'them' but between 'us' and about 'us'.

Another important finding concerns *factuality*. All the photographs in which UNHCR workers are engaged in some activity or work demonstrate that the workforce is actively working hard to complete their tasks. Apart from depicting them frequently doing medical work, in 9 photographs they are shown administering vaccinations. The employees are shown rescuing people from boats and distributing supply bundles to provide vitally needed emergency shelter, food, potable water and health screening to the thousands of refugee women, children and men arriving from the Tigray region in search of protection (Figure 4)[8]. They are also depicted distributing relief items, including blankets, sleeping mats, plastic sheeting and hygiene kits, as well as installing solar panels to provide immediate energy to the refugee camps. Therefore, all these images 'speak' in favour of a policy of real action in which the visual material processes

---

[6] Cfr. also Bellander 2021 who points out such a view as far as Doctors Without Borders is concerned.
[7] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2021/11/61923cee4/social-workers-rally-support-displaced-people-northern-ethiopia.html [last accessed April 2022].
[8] [last accessed April 2022].

of 'doing and acting' characterizes the UNHRC staff, thus establishing a semantic configuration that provides a schemata for illustrating a factually reliable visual narrative and experience of what is going on (cfr. Halliday 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999).

The UNHCR's active and effective involvement in humanitarian programmes, such as the construction of solar panels to provide affordable green energy to the communities of refugees, etc. is indeed a successful means of attracting donations from institutional as well as private donors (Figure 5)[9]. In this sense, the photographs analysed are not simply constative images offering information or reporting facts, but rather they seem 'aesthetically' acting performatively, since they endeavour to communicate an 'action of authenticity and promise' of how the money will be spent, and this produces an extraordinary perlocutionary effect in persuading the viewers. By shaking viewers' consciousness, these images have the power to convince and encourage the viewer to donate, sure in the knowledge that the visual testimony is reliable - because "the camera doesn't lie" (Fairclough 1989: 208) – and that the money will be spent effectively in order to change the state of the refugees by relieving them from suffering.

Visual design of interaction: conceptualizing the position of the potential donor
The role of potential donors is examined by looking at the relationship formed between the represented participants (the refugees and the humanitarian workers) and the interactive participant (the viewer), thanks to factors such as the photographer's closeness (proxemics), the looks and gazes of the represented participants ("offering" and "demanding" images), and the choices of angles and perspective in taking the photographs (Kress and van Leeuwen 2017; Hodge and Kress 1988).

The importance of proxemics has already been discussed above in *4.2*; in this Section it will be reconsidered in the light of a symbolic relationship occurring between the refugees and the viewers. Proxemics, or the "size of frame" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 130), is the choice of distance that the photographer makes in taking any given photograph. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), Kress and van Leeuwen (2017), Hodge and Kress (1988), Kress (2010) etc., this choice can suggest different types of relations between the represented participants and the interactive participants (viewers); for example, as said above in *4.1*, close-shots suggest a sense of intimacy between the subject depicted and the viewer, while on the other hand, long shots are seen as distancing the viewer from the depicted participants, meaning the viewers perceive the represented participants impersonally as distant foreigners or distant "others" (Chouliaraky 2017: 9).

In line with a study carried out by Bellander (2021) on DWB (Doctors without Borders), the first finding reveals that close-up perspective photos account for the majority of the photographs (28 accounting for 55% of the total number of images). The widespread use of a close-up frame can therefore give the impression that the interactive participant (the viewer) knows the represented participants (the refugee) intimately. The majority of the close-up views (17 photographs) show the participants in full body length, but a significant number (14 images) only show them from the waist up. Interactive participants are real people who

---

[9] https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/6/60b8c9874/solar-cooperatives-give-refugees-locals-ethiopia-clean-energy-livelihoods.html [last accessed April 2022].

therefore make sense of this kind of image in the context of social situations which, to different degrees and in very different ways, view and regulate what may be "said" with the images and how images may be interpreted (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 119).

In contrast, there are very few long-shot images in the photos under scrutiny. One of the very few to be found in UNHRC UK's website is one that depicts Ethiopian refugees in Sudan's eastern refugee settlements of Um Rakuba and Tunaydbah; they have been impacted after several weeks of storms razed their tents, swept away their belongings, and destroyed infrastructure (Figure 6)[10]. Although this relationship with human suffering "from the standpoint of distance" (Boltansky 1999: 13) situates the refugees and 'us' in a position of 'impersonal distance' with no real personal involvement, the long shot in this specific case gives the viewer a general overview of geographic landscapes of destroyed infrastructures and tents devastated by the wind and the storm. The 'emergency within an emergency', with clearly evident cause-effect relationships of this 'crisis within a crisis' dramatically increases the awareness of the worsening plight of the refugees, which will affect the viewer subjectively and emotionally, calling for a very strong reflection that invites engagement in the refugee situation and attention to a discourse of morality (Bellander 2021). In other words, the emergency aggravated by another emergency does indeed show things in a distant and detached way, but with a greater emotional closeness to the viewer; the refugee situation appears real and objective to the viewer as it shows the disaster in such a horrifying way that it leaves the viewer feeling a more 'close' and humanised representation of refugees and their innocent vulnerability, not only as a consequence of a failure of international politics but also as a consequence of the natural disasters that afflict that part of the world.

With regard to the gazes and glazed looks in the eyes of refugees, such images can be analysed for a performative viewpoint in terms of both their 'offer' or 'demand' (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999). A close observation reveals that both migrants and aid workers frequently look into the camera lens. About a third of the photographs are considered challenging because one or more of the individuals makes direct eye contact with us, the observer. Looking at them in this close – up perspective, it can be said that the photos try to establish an imaginary relationship between the refugees and the observer, one of morality and identification with the represented participants. The gaze and the eyes of the refugees in the photographs seem to speak to the viewer, saying things like 'I am here', 'I have urgent needs, and you may help me,' and so emotionally influence the viewer, (see Figures 7) [11] (Cfr. Bellander 2021). This visual configuration therefore summons up an "image act" of "demanding" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 122), an 'aesthetic property' (Chouliaraky 2012) that acts performatively 'to do something with the image', namely, to suggest a profile for potential donor-viewers and encourage a relationship of humanity and care with charitable and altruistic donors who understand the importance of fundraising.

[10] Nearly 4,000 out of 10,000 individual family tents have been damaged by strong winds, heavy rains, and hailstorms.
[11] https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/12/5fe1b3f94/unhcr-partners-urgently-seek-us156-million-support-refugees-fleeing-ethiopias.html. [last accessed April 2022]

The remaining photographs convey the 'image act' of 'offer' as shown in the photo in Figure 8[12] taken in a small, one-room stone cottage in Mekele - the regional capital of Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region. A certified nurse is volunteering at the small makeshift health centre, helping people in need. She is dispensing antibiotics and emergency drugs, which signify vital aid for refugees' lives to the viewer. The campaign that the nurse is promoting together with all the other doctors and healthcare personnel, where vital aid is provided for suffering people and 'the slogan' is intended to provoke and engage the viewers, is a good example of what Chouliaraki (2010)) and Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) calls the "post humanitarianism style" of appeal in fundraising. However, the image that is analysed does not represent a proper campaign itself, involving, for example, "the glamorous presence or fictionalised" (Chouliaraky and Stolic 2017: 10) narcissist celebrities in support of the refugees. Instead, photos like this show common people as volunteers and some of the displaced who have organized themselves - in collaboration with the authorities and with support from the UN Refugee Agency and partners involved in helping refugees in Sudan – in order to provide vitally needed emergency shelter in the local community. In this specific case, the photograph depicts 'a simple' nurse belonging to the local community engaged in daily work to support one child of the same local community. She is clearly communicating with the viewer saying "I'm happy to help my community in this critical time"[13] and 'you can do the same by saving people's lives'. In these photos, however, the eye contact is established only between the represented participants, namely the nurse and the displaced person respectively, but the nurse does not look at the viewer. This different perspective "applies to the viewer's emotions and [...] morality" (Bellander 2021: 325) in a different way; according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1999: 144), this kind of photo brings about a different imaginary relationship, "a relation perhaps of admiration for, and identification with" the represented participants and the viewers – potential donors- , which in this specific case is the identification with the nurse who is providing help to the displaced people in need.

Another manner in which images under scrutiny forge connections between the represented participants and the interactive participants, is perspective. Producing images not only involves the choice between 'offer' and 'demand', as stated above, but also the selection of an angle (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 135), namely the "point of view", i.e. the implication of the possibility of expressing and encoding a subjective attitude towards the viewer. The corpus under scrutiny reveals that 29 out of the 52 photos, or more than 55% of the represented participants are taken from a horizontal, frontal viewpoint. This means that the data provides good conditions for the interactive participant to experience involvement in the represented scenes (cfr. Bellander 2021). Indeed, the difference between the oblique and front angle is the difference between "detachment and involvement" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 143). The horizontal angle encodes whether or not "an image-producer (and hence the viewer) is 'involved' with the represented participants or not" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 143). The front angle states "what you see is part of our world, something you are involved with"; on the other hand, the oblique hand says "what you see is not part of our world it is their world, something you are not involved with" (*ibidem*). The producers of the images have therefore

---

[12]　　　　　https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2021/7/60daa5954/displaced-nurses-provide-vital-health-care-others-displaced-ethiopias-tigray.html [last accessed April 2022].
[13] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2021 [last accessed April 2022].

consciously aligned themselves with the refugees showing them not as 'others' but as part of 'our world'.

Equally important is the view from behind. It is for the observer to watch the scenario from a position behind that of the person depicted. 6 of the photos show this to be the case. As a result, the observer experiences the scenarios from the refugees' perspectives. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), Hodge and Kress (1988), exposing one's back means making oneself vulnerable. Different angles from behind someone's back give the viewer the impression that they are at the centre of the scenario being shown. This is specifically the case in 6 photographs in which the role of the viewer is cast in the role of a refugee (see Figure 9)[14], either standing or moving en masse into Eastern Sudan with more than 5,000 women, children and men fleeing. The good conditions for the construction of the viewer to feel involved in the depicted scenes apply again to a discourse of morality where the viewer is asked to consider the refugees' needs. Thus, in this type of imagery the UNHRC website seems to 'empower the viewer to be part of the narrative', and feel involved as a valued co-actor in the scenario depicted.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taking Bellander's work as a point of departure (2021) and drawing upon the tools of Multimodal CDA and social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Kress and van Leeuwen 2017; Kress 2010; Hodge and Kress 1988), this contribution has endeavoured to present a visual analysis of how the Tigray refugee situation has been created discursively in images on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHRC) United Kingdom's website. The intention of this study has been to suggest a view of humanitarian communication as performative (Chouliaraky 2010), through which paradigmatic forms of feeling are enacted in order to promote 'a call to action' towards suffering. In line with this perspective, the study's use of the social semiotic and the Multimodal CDA approach (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999) facilitates an understanding of how viewers' emotions may be affected by the settings, people and actions depicted, as well as the choices made with regard to angles and proximity.

From the analysis of the images, it is possible to see that the visual designs of the refugee situation in Tigray revealed a completely different form of discourse compared to the discourses of nationalism, fear of the 'other', racism, etc, which other scholars have pointed to in studies on western news media (Chouliaraky 2017; Adi and Cheregi 2015; Ghazalaswad 2019). A captivating combination of various forms of appeal seems to be the key (or at least one of the keys) to giving an extraordinary perlocutionary effect which inspired people in the UK to be the major contributors to the Tigrayan refugee crisis. According to Bellander (2021), the UNHRC is successful in incorporating images about ethics, community, and racial and gender equality. It also employs medical discourse, which to some extent is to be expected even though the United Nations Refugee Agency does not focus specifically on medicine (unlike Doctors Without Borders).

The corpus analysed depicts images of highly contextualised environments, which give the refugee situation a genuine, authentic appearance. The convincing reality of the contextualised setting works performatively and exerts an emotional impact on the viewers, something which

---

[14]   https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2020/11/5fbcccbf4/ethiopian-refugee-numbers-sudan-cross-40000-mark.html.

increases their empathy towards the sufferer and makes them feel closely involved in the refugee situation; it is a context that lends itself well to the discourse of morality (Bellander 2021). Apart from the crucial first moment of the forced fleeing of the refugees in Tigray (November and December 2020), in which they were depicted through distant-proxemics, in all the other photos they are shown alone or in small groups, positioned at a front angle with close proxemic views. This reinforces our understanding of refugees as unique people with the same needs as other people in terms of their physical and mental health (Bellander 2021). By showing individual participants, the UNHRC imagery therefore shows it opposes the idea of massifying and passivating those in need (Bellander 2021; Chouliaraki 2010). This criticism also applies to recent news accounts of the refugee crisis, where it is claimed that the absence of individual portraits dehumanises refugees (Bellander 2021; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Drueke *et al.* 2021).

The narrative that spawned from the initial shock effect of 'external images', and which led to the subsequent positive effect of 'internal images', serves to highlight the importance of setting and achieving goals in order to help those in need. The performative force of visibility and solidarity through factuality resulted in donations and concrete aid with the assurance that donor money will not be spent in vain.

As for the self-representation of the UNHRC in relation to DWB (Bellander (2021), images of the organization's male and female employees of various ages show people of various ethnic backgrounds, indexed by means skin-colour, skin tone and attire. This reinforces a discourse of ethnic and gender equality. In addition to this, it is important to say that many African personnel are also present among the UNHRC staff, something which minimizes the notion of "the colonial paternalism where the Adult – Northern offers help and knowledge to the infantilised South" (Burman 1994: 241). Indeed, as stated by Seda Kuzucu, UNHCR's Senior Emergency Coordinator, "social workers come from *all over the world* and they are very close to the community [....] [italics added]. Moreover, the choices of the proxemics and vertical and horizontal angles portrays aid workers as being approachable, practical and reliable (Bellander 2021).

Another important aspect worth mentioning is empowerment: in this respect, UNHRC imagery encourages viewers to feel engaged with the depicted scenes and treated as important actors. This identification conveys a performative force as it applies again to the discourse of morality and solidarity, in which the viewer is asked to meet the refugees needs by donating funds to the UNHRC. Visitors to the website are thus reminded by the UNHRC imagery that the role of the news photographs on the UN Refugee Agency website is not merely to report and narrate the issue of Tigray refugees to the UK people, but to advocate that refugees are real people whose viewpoint the viewers must share.

References

Adi, A. Cheregi, B. (2015) The visual framing of Romanian migrantsin the national press: A social semiotic approach. In *Jurnalism şi comunicare,* Anual X, N2: 12-24.

Bellander, T. (2021) Fleeing as an Activity of Waiting: Visual Representations of the Word's Refugee situation on Médicines Sans Frontière Sweden's Website. In *Journal of Refugee Studies,* Vol. 35 No. 1: 310-329.

Benthall, J. (1993) *Disasters, Relief and the Media.* London: I.B.Tauris.

Boeva, A. (2016) Discursive Construction of Refugees, Migrants and Asylum Seekers in British and American News Sources. In *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 236: 53–58.

Boltanski, L. (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Breazu, P. and Machin, D. (2018) A Critical Multimodal Analysis of the Romanian Press Coverage of Camp Evictions and Deportations of the Roma Migrants from France. In *Discourse & Communication* 12(4): 339–356.

Burman, E. (1994) Innocents abroad: western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies. In *Disasters* 18(3): 238–253.

Butler, J. (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Chouliaraky, L. (2017) Symbolic bordering: the self representation of migrants and refugees in digital news. In *Popular communication,* 15 (2): 78-94.

Chouliaraky, L. Stolic, T. (2017) 'Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee 'Crisis': A Visual Typology of European News'. In *Media, Culture & Society* 39(8): 1162–1177.

Chouliaraky, L. Zaborowski, R. (2017) Voice and community in the refugee crisis: A Content Analysis of news coverage in Eight European Countries. In *International Communication Gazette,* 0 (0): 1- 23.

Chouliaraky, L. (2010) Post-Humanitarianism: humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity. In *International journal of cultural studies,* 13(2): 107-126.

Chouliaraki, L. (2008) The mediation of suffering and the vision of a cosmopolitan public. In *Television & New Media* 9(5): 371–391.

Cottle, S. Nolan, D. (2007) Global Humanitarianism and the Changing aid-media Field. In *Journalism Studies,* Vol. 8(6) pp. 862-878.

Couldry, N. (2010) *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*. London: Sage.

Dogra, N. (2011) The Mixed Metaphor of Third World Woman: Gendered Representations by International Development NGOs. In *Third World Quarterly* 32(2): 333–348.

Drüeke, R. Klaus, E. Moser, A. (2021) Spaces of Identity in the Context of Media Images and Artistic Representations of Refugees and Migration in Austria. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(1): 160–183.

Fairclough, N. (1995*) Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Edward Arnold.

Fairclough, N. (1989) *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

Fr yd, Y. (2017) Who Cares? Operation Day's Work's Booklet Covers as Appeals for Humanitarian Aid. In *Scandinavian Studies* 89(4): 548–572.

Ghazalaswad, N. (2019) Biased Neutrality: The Symbolic Construction of the Syrian Refugee in the New York Times. In *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36(4): 357–375.

Halliday, M. A. K. Matthiessen, C. M. (2004) *An Introduction to functional Grammar*. London: Routledge.

Hodge, R. Kress, G. (1988) *Social Semiotics.*Cambridge: Polity Press*.*

Kress, G. van Leeuwen, T. (1999) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2017) *Multimodal Discourse.* London: Routledge.

Kress, G. (2010) *Multimodality*. New York: Routledge.

Kryzanowki, M. (2018) Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics: On Politicization and Mediatization of the "Refugee Crisis". In *Poland'. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies: Mediatization and Politicization of Refugee Crisis in Europe* 16(1–2): 76–96.

Ledin, P. and Machin, D. (2018) *Doing Visual Analysis from Theory to Practice*. London: Sage.

Lidchi, H. (1999) Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery. In Skelton, T. and Allen, T. (eds.) *Culture and Global Change*. London: Routledge.

Lissner, J. (1979) *The Politics of Altruism*. Geneva: Lutheran World Foundation.

Piga, A. (2018) Epistemic modality in the visual 'art of dissent': the expression of 'realism' in ideological and political Sardinian *murals* (2018). In *Lingue e Linguaggi,* 28, pp. 227-251.

van Leeuwen, T. (2005) *Introducing Social Semiotics.* London: Routledge.